

# MUHAMMAD MOHAR ALI

(B. 1929 – D. 2007)

Professor Muhammad Mohar Ali who, in 2000 won *the King Faisal International Prize* for his writings on the spread and cultural impact of Islam outside the Arab world, died on 11 April 2007 at his home in Woodford, Essex after a long illness (cancer). A prolific historian and the author of more than a dozen works, he published his first book, *A Survey of Muslim Rule in India* in 1954 at Chittagong (East Pakistan), while his most recent title, *A Word for Word Meaning of the Qur'ān*, a monumental work, appeared in 2003.

In June 2006 an ill and frail Dr. Muhammad Mohar Ali told me about his early education at a local school in Bagerhat (Khulna District), where he was born in 1929, and his Upper Primary and Secondary education at Hooghly Muhsin College in West Bengal. In 1946, a year before he passed his Matriculation, he (as a member of the *All-Bengal Muslim Students' League*) was elected **General Secretary of the Students Union of Hooghly Muhsin College**. He studied Arabic and History, among other subjects, during his Secondary and Islamic Intermediate classes at Hooghly Muhsin College and Kazi Nazrul College respectively. He subsequently canvassed on behalf of the parliamentary candidates from the **Muslim League Party** for election to the independent state of Pakistan. At this critical juncture, before the Partition of India, Mohar Ali spent his weekends in the company of such celebrated politicians like Hussain Shahid Suhrawardy, Mawlvi Abul Hashim and Shah Azizur Rahman in Calcutta and was himself involved in political activity. He was involved in politics from his student days.

Following the partition of India, Mohar Ali moved from West Bengal to Dacca, where he studied at **Kazi Nazrul Islam College**. He continued to take part in student politics and was elected *General Secretary of the Students Union of Kazi Nazrul Islam College*. As a student politician he later became involved in the **Language Movement of Pakistan**. At Dacca University, he graduated with Honours and obtained an MA from the Department of History. He was politically active throughout this period. He then taught History at various colleges, including Jessore Michael Madhusudan College (1954-55),

Dacca Government College (1955-56), Chittagong Government College (1956-7) and Rajshahi Government College (1957), all in East Pakistan. Then, in 1958 he joined the History Department at Dacca University. In 1960 he was admitted to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS), to work for a Ph.D. He studied British Indian History and his thesis, "The Bengali Reaction to Christian Missionary Activities (1833-1857)" was submitted in 1963. While at SOAS, he was granted a special permission by his supervisor, Professor Ken Ballhatchet to pursue Law studies at Lincoln's Inn. He was subsequently called to the Bar in 1964.

While teaching at various colleges he wrote the following books which were intended for use by students of Intermediate of Arts (I.A.): *A Brief Survey of Muslim Rule in India* (1954) and *Intermediate General History*, parts 1 and 2, Chittagong (1957). Before his arrival at London University he had published other advanced works such as *Islam in the Modern World*, Chittagong,(1958), a translation of an Arabic book into Bengali, *Tajrīd al-Bukhārī*, part 1 (Chittagong,1958) and *An Outline of Ancient Indo-Pak History* (United Book Exchange, Dacca, 1960). Thus he had five books to his credit before he began his doctoral research at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

After his return to Dacca in 1964, Dr. Ali thought of practising Law at Dacca High Court, but soon abandoned the idea because it could have prematurely ended his career as a scholar. After some hesitation he started teaching History at the University of Dacca and was eventually appointed a Reader there. In 1969 Ali was awarded a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship and he returned home in the following year. In 1965 Ali's doctoral dissertation was published as *The Bengali Reaction to Christian Missionary Activities, 1833-1857* by the Mehrub Publications, Chittagong, East Pakistan. The *Autobiography and Other Writings of Nawab Abdul Latif* (edited by Ali with an introduction) was published in 1966. This was a period of political tension in East Pakistan when a separatist movement led by the *Awami League* was gaining ground. Ali, who had been active in the Pakistan Movement as a student, was committed to the ideal of Pakistan and thereby antagonized the Bengali nationalists.

Ali resisted the idea of East Pakistan as a separate nation and made many enemies including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had known Ali since 1949, when he had been a student with him at Dacca University and a member of **DACSU (Dacca University Students Union)**. He had tried to persuade Ali to join him in a campaign to discredit the Qua'id-e-Millat Liaqat Ali Khan during his visit to Dacca by unfurling a Black Flag during his speech. Mohar Ali tried to persuade Sheikh Mujib against such actions, and when he failed to do so, he threatened to mobilise student opinion against Mujib. They parted company after a DACSU meeting and since then Mujib had regarded Ali as his political foe. According to the latter, this disagreement cost him dearly and on the break-up of East Pakistan he was imprisoned in 1971, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was then the President of Bangladesh, refused to release him. He remained in jail until 1974, when a general amnesty was granted to political prisoners. Mohar Ali was banned from travelling abroad until late 1974, when, with the help of his former mentor, Professor Ken Ballhatchet he returned to the United Kingdom.

During his stay in Britain Professor Ali renewed his contact with old friends and continued to pursue his research at London University. Before leaving Bangladesh in 1975 he sent a manuscript entitled, *The Fall of Sirajuddaula*, which was published by Mehrub of Chittagong. In the same year, the Muslim Council of Europe held an international conference in London at which Ali read a paper entitled, "*History of the Muslims in Bengal*". This attracted the attention of some Saudi diplomats and Dr. Ali was offered a research post at Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh to pursue research on the Islamic history of Bengal. While in Riyadh he took the opportunity to deepen his knowledge of Arabic. From 1976 to 1986, Mohar Ali worked on the history of Islam in Bengal and this research bore fruit in the 1980s when the three volume *History of the Muslims of Bengal* was published by Imam Muhammad University. At this stage he turned from general history to Islamic history and gained wide recognition in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world.

After his *History of the Muslims of Bengal* was published, Ali was offered a research position by the Islamic University of Madinah, where he worked from 1987 to 1998 during which he produced *Sīrat al-Nabī and the Orientalists* (two volumes) which dealt with the life of Prophet Muhammad at Makkah. The result of his research was published (first edition, 1419 AH/1997 CE) by the **Centre for the Service of Sunnah and Sirah** at Madinah. During his time at Madinah Dr. Ali was seconded for a year at the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'ān, where he developed an interest in the Qur'ānic Studies. After returning to London, Ali began to work on his *A Word for Word Meaning of the Qur'ān* (3 volumes, Ipswich, 2003). For his magnum opus, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, which was characterized by originality, depth and objectivity, Dr. Ali was awarded the King Faisal International Prize in the field of spread and cultural impact of Islam outside the Arab world. He was the first scholar from Bangladesh to receive this prestigious prize.

When I met him at his home in June 2006 he told me that he was working on the biography of Prophet Muhammad at Madinah (622-632 CE). When he passed away on 11 April 2007 this last book remained incomplete. In his final years Professor Ali was critical of the Orientalists regarding some of their assumptions about the Qur'ān. He published three books and booklets regarding the Qur'ān and the Orientalists in 1999, 2002 and 2004. These books, although controversial in nature, show that the human spirit can triumph over death. He is survived by his wife and three sons. Dr. Mohar Ali will be remembered by many generations for his seminal research on the history of the Muslims of Bengal. It needs to be emphasized that his volumes on the Muslim History of Bengal (patronized and published by Imam Muhammad University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia) have improved the image of the Muslims of Bangladesh in the Arab world.

**By Professor M. A. J. Beg, MA (Rajshahi), PhD (Cambridge University).**

(Information derived from an interview with Dr. Mohar Ali in June 2006)